

Designer drinks and drunkenness among schoolchildren

Study left several questions unanswered

EDITOR,—Neil McKeganey and colleagues report that 12-15 year olds who had recently consumed "new drinks" (white cider and fruit wines) reported having drunk most on the most recent occasion and were more likely to have been drunk than those who had consumed other drinks.¹ Their study begs several questions.

Firstly, was their sample made up of both sexes, and did they control for this?

Secondly, how recent was "recent" drinking?

Thirdly, how many of the children were occasional or regular drinkers, especially of new drinks?

Fourthly, drinkers of white cider and fruit wines ranked fourth and fifth, respectively, in the mean number of days on which they had drunk in the previous year. Drinkers of fruit wines ranked highest in the mean number of units consumed on the most recent occasion (marginally ahead of drinkers of premium lager), while drinkers of white cider ranked fourth. Yet, rather than compare new drinks with specific product types, the authors make comparisons with the aggregated category "old drinks," which includes products with low mean scores on these measures. Why?

Fifthly, why compare recent drinking with lifetime occurrences of drunkenness (undefined)? How many of the children had tried new drinks recently but had had their drunken episode several months or years previously or even before new drinks came on the market?

Finally, what products were consumed during drunken episodes?

The safest conclusion to be drawn from McKeganey and colleagues' study is that, among a group of 12-15 year olds of unknown sex who were infrequent or regular drinkers, those who consumed new drinks at some point during an unspecified recent period, depending on whom they were compared with, drank more or less on their last occasion (whenever that was) and reported fewer or more drinking days in the previous year, and were more or less likely to have been drunk (whatever that means) on an unknown number of occasions over their lifetime.

Considerable public concern has been expressed about young people drinking "alcopops" (and hence these drugs have been given free publicity). Yet our study of the brand preferences of 15-17 year olds found that curiosity about alcopops rarely translated into their becoming the drink of preference.² Perhaps older people drink alcopops for their youthful associations, while young people continue to prefer the more adult old drinks. The fact that most of the children reported no difficulties in obtaining alcohol suggests that easy availability is a major problem.

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- 1 McKeganey N, Forsyth A, Barnard M, Hay G. Designer drinks and drunkenness amongst a sample of Scottish schoolchildren. *BMJ* 1996;313:401. (17 August.)
- 2 Crawford A, Allsop DT. *Young people and alcohol in Scotland*. Glasgow: Scottish Council on Alcohol, 1996.

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The voluntary code of practice launched by the alcohol industry in response to concerns about the appeal of alcopops to young people has so far made no difference to the way in which these drinks are being named, labelled, or marketed.⁴ Stronger action is needed to ensure that producers of alcohol take their responsibilities towards young people seriously and that a mandatory code is established to which all producers are required to adhere; this code should be monitored by an independent body and not, as now, by the alcohol industry itself.

Further research is needed to assess the appeal to young people of the labelling and marketing devices being used by some sections of the alcohol industry, as well as to assess the impact that alcopops are having on young people's drinking patterns. As McKeganey and colleagues conclude, the continuing development of the new alcoholic soft drinks market is likely to worsen an already worrying situation.

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- 1 McKeganey N, Forsyth A, Barnard M, Hay G. Designer drinks and drunkenness amongst a sample of Scottish schoolchildren. *BMJ* 1996;313:401. (17 August.)
- 2 Goddard E. *Teenage drinking in 1994*. London: HMSO, 1996.
- 3 McKibben M. *Pop fiction? The truth about alcopops*. London: Alcohol Concern, 1996.
- 4 Portman Group. *Code of practice on the naming, packaging and merchandising of alcoholic drinks*. London: Portman Group, 1996.

Authors' reply

EDITOR,—A Crawford and D T Allsop raise several questions about our short report. Our sample was of mixed sex (49.9% boys, 50.1% girls); there was no significant difference in reported alcohol consumption between the sexes. We defined recent alcohol consumption as being consumption on the last occasion on which the schoolchildren consumed alcohol. With regard to the breakdown between "regular" and "occasional" drinkers, these terms are inherently ambiguous in this age group. We are criticised for comparing consumption of the new drinks with consumption of old drinks, but it seems perfectly reasonable to us to compare the two categories as a shorthand method; in addition, we included information on the mean number of units of alcohol consumed on the last occasion for both new and old drinks, enabling product comparisons to be made from our data.

We are not suggesting that it is only the new drinks that are being consumed by young people or that it is the new drinks alone that are leading to the high level of drunkenness that we identified. Vodka was also being widely consumed by the schoolchildren in our survey and was associated with high levels of reported drunkenness. In their survey Crawford and Allsop found that the "alcopops" are not the preferred choice of 15-17 year olds. Our report, however, was about white ciders and fruit wines, which are being widely consumed by schoolchildren.

The important question is what is to be done about the plethora of alcoholic drinks that are attractive to young people and are being widely consumed by them. The alcohol industry would have us believe that a voluntary code is sufficient to curb the worst excesses of the targeting of

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More "alcopops" have come on market since study was done

EDITOR,—Neil McKeganey and colleagues' survey of the drinking patterns of schoolchildren in Dundee highlights concerns that the alcohol industry's development of designer drinks such as white ciders and fruit wines is exacerbating an already worrying level of drinking among under 18 year olds.¹ From 1990 to 1994 the number of regular drinkers among the 11-15 age group rose considerably (from 13% to 17% in England, 15% to 19% in Wales, and 9% to 14% in Scotland).² The average weekly consumption of those in this age group who drank also increased appreciably in the same period—for example, from 5.4 units to 6.4 units in England.²

The authors' survey was conducted seven months before the launch of the first so called alcoholic soft drink or "alcopop" on to the British market in June 1995. Just over a year later there are about 80 alcopops on the market, ranging from alcoholic lemonades, colas, and strawberryades to alcoholic soda waters and spring waters. These drinks represent a dangerous development as regards young people: they are sweet, fizzy drinks with a high alcoholic content that are marketed in containers depicting cartoon characters and gimmicks such as labels that glow under ultraviolet light, and they are affordable.³